

## Grammaturgy for the New Millennium

by Porch Lagersthwaite

Consider the following workplace exchange, conducted over an instant messenger application, taken from real life:

Employee: I'll get the report to you on Monday.

Manager: lol

When this actually happened, the Employee interpreted the Manager's reply as a snide rebuke, a disparaging reproof of his (the Employee's) inefficiency. And indeed that's what it was. But the Manager could just as well have been expressing joy upon hearing that the Employee was finally completing the long overdue report. Or the Manager might have been recalling a joke she heard earlier in the day about a humorous corollary of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, and her reply might have had nothing to do with the report. Or it might have been a pro forma response the Manager uses to reply to any message she receives.

This illustrates an oft-acknowledged issue in email and text message communication: it is nigh impossible to convey tone, nuance, intent. Had this been an actual conversation in the Manager's office, then to amplify the contemptuousness of her reply, the Manager might have adopted a sneering expression, or might have spit in the general direction of the employee. But within an email chat utility, there is no reply she can make to the Employee without some attendant ambiguity. After all, it would scarcely be better if she wrote "I bet" (with which the Manager might be expressing such confidence in the Employee that she would be willing to stake a sum of money on the report's timely completion), or "I'll believe it when I see it" (which might just be a statement of an epistemological principle), or "that'll be the day!" (which might express how momentous the upcoming Monday will be when the report is submitted).

Until the efforts of the present author, this prosody problem was widely considered to be intractable. Earlier commentators blamed an impoverished vocabulary, (whence the familiar mantra "NEED MORE WIRDS" typically misattributed to Jakobson), as if coining words like "flexitarian" or "chillax" or "listicle" would let us newly express our withering condescension, or alert our reader to a startling insight we are about to impart. If structural linguistics has taught us anything, and it has, it is that words are but empty vessels, what noise they make all sound and fury signifying nothing. There must be grammar.

Like a stalled car, we pause to consider an internet phenomenon that ostensibly augments our language's capacity to convey inflection, emphasis, and mood: the emoticon. In the time of the Pharaohs, no self-respecting Egyptian scribe was ever tempted, writing



[scarab beetle] [dabbling duck] [papyrus]  
 ("the scarab beetle ate my papyrus")

to add "😞" at the end. One must go back twenty millennia to the cave paintings at Laas Gaal in Maroodi Jeex, where along the south wall appears the image



[camel] [camel] [baby camel] [tree] [sunglasses emoji]

(the meaning of which is still debated among petrographologists) to find anything resembling an emoticon in pre-internet writing. The central lesson of semiotics is that the linguistic sign is arbitrary; it unifies an arbitrary signifier with its signified. The human capacity to engage such abstraction is precisely what makes modal logic, parasemiology, phonology, and reality calibration possible. By bypassing this abstraction, the retrograde "innovation" that is the emoticon threatens to undo all human achievement from the last 20,000 years. We shall devote to it no further attention.

### **Towards a New Grammar**

*Wherein we propose four extensions to existing English grammar to afford greater clarity and precision in expression.*

#### **1. The Copula**

We begin with one of the more vexing grammatical conundra. Is it correct to say "It is I" or "It is me?" Some self-anointed arbiters of usage argue that "to be" is a copula, and thus should link words in the nominative or *subject* case. To which we reply: is being subjective? No. It is a well-decided ontological proposition, outside of some fields of postmodern inquiry too recondite to merit attention, that being is objective. The verb "to be" should therefore link to a word in the accusative or *object* case, at least if language is to have any logical connection to reality. That question now decided, there remains one issue: the nominative and accusative cases of English nouns are indistinguishable. If one says "The mayor is the barber," is the barber the subject or

the object? And what of “The barber is the mayor?” We propose to resolve this problem by appending the enclitic “-o” (the “o” for “object”) to the object on one side of a copular verb. We can see this in practice by accordingly emending the opening of Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*:

It was the besto of times, it was the worsto of times, it was the ageo of wisdom, it was the ageo of foolishness, it was the epocho of belief, it was the epocho of incredulity, it was the seasono of Light, it was the seasono of Darkness...

The prose positively sings, like a bel canto aria. It is gratifying to imagine Dickens spinning in his grave, with pure delight at seeing his rough-hewn block of text faceted by the lapidary process of history into a sparkling gemstone.

## 2. Person Zero

Standard English recognizes only the first, second, and third grammatical persons. In Finnish, on the other hand, it is common to use the *zero person*, with an empty subject. So it would be commonplace in Helsinki to see a sign that reads “ei saa syödä” (“not to be eaten”), perhaps affixed to a bicycle.

The zero person expands the capabilities of language. Free of subject, the zero person expresses universal truths, not contingent on the biases and fallibilities of an individual speaker. Whereas the subjunctive connotes possibility, the zero person connotes certainty. It thus is the natural voice not only of the omniscient narrator in literature, but also of the scientist, and of the philosopher.

To recast a sentence written in Previous English in the zero person, one can:

- Delete the current subject
- Put the verb at the end of the sentence or clause
- Add ‘to be’ in front of or after the verb (the rules governing this choice are too complicated to explain here)

To illustrate the literary advantages of the zero person, we can accordingly rephrase the omniscient narrator’s first words in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*:

A trutho universally acknowledged to be is, that in possession of a good fortune, in want of a wife must to be. However little knowno on his first entering a neighbourhood to be may, so well fixedo in the minds of the surrounding families to be is, that the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters to be considered.

The universality of the truth of the first sentence is now forcefully conveyed, without sacrificing any of the wit or elegance of the original. Austen herself would doubtless look upon this new text with a hint of pride, and not a whit of prejudice.

### 3. Particles

The grammatical particle is a central feature of dozens of languages. English, in particular, is comparatively undeveloped. Take the following example from Japanese:

あなたが満足する前に、私はあなたのために何頭の空飛ぶ馬を買わなければなりませんか？

Anata ga manzoku suru mae ni, watashi wa anata no tame ni nantō no soratobu-ba o kawanakereba narimasen ka?

(“How many flying horses must I buy for you before you are satisfied?”)

The concluding “か” (“ka”) is a particle indicating that a question is posed. In sophisticated usage, the particle can convey function, relation, affect, and more. Here we only propose a starter kit of new English particles, which, if extended and widely adopted, will greatly enhance the expressive possibilities of the language. It makes our task easier that a foundation has already been laid. For a century, atomic scientists have been working to decipher the grammar of reality, and, as of this writing, they have identified 57 types of small particle. The task falls to us to define the grammatical analogs of these barely visible subatomic specks:

- i) the *photon* (“pho”) can be used when the writer wants to convey a lighter tone than the words alone convey. It might be alarming to hear a dinner companion say “Someone appears to have poisoned my soup!” but imagine instead them saying “Someone appears to have poisoned my soup pho!” This now becomes, perhaps, a *bon mot* about an unpalatable broth, or perhaps the speaker is cheerfully disposed towards dangerous dining. There is now no cause for alarm, even if the meaning remains ambiguous (there remain several dozen other particles that can clarify this consommé imbroglio).
- ii) the *graviton* (“gra”), conversely can be used when the writer wishes to suggest more gravity than words alone convey.
- iii) the *inflaton* (“inf”). We all await the joyous day when we learn whether the inflaton particle is truly indispensable to a cosmological explanation of our expanding universe, or whether Nature found a more parsimonious solution. But since the inflaton’s very existence is in question, it can serve as a question particle, the English analog of “か” described above.

We now warn the sensitive reader that the ensuing discussion of the gluon particle includes a sentence that, if misconstrued, suggests cruel treatment of animals. This is not material we would normally care to include in a dissertation on grammar, and the reader who would prefer to avoid it may skip ahead to item v), on the tachyon. We are compelled to use such an example to illustrate that many Previous English sentences cannot be parsed unambiguously. Particles can obviate this ambiguity, and can thus eliminate this type of animal cruelty altogether. This is one reason the New Grammar is so important.

iv) the *gluon* (“glu”) used with conjunctions, is a particle that binds two semantically linked units. A farmhand, asked to explain her duties, is apt to reply “I whip cream and milk cows.” One might feel deep concern for the poor milk cow on this farm, but in this instance, the farmhand does it no harm: she is using “milk” as a verb. The gluon can illustrate which units in the sentence are meant to be read together. If we write “I whip cream and glu milk cows”, it now instantly becomes clear that “whip cream” and “milk cows” are parallel units, and that “whip” and “milk” are both verbs. If instead the sentence included “milk glu cows”, we would know that “milk cow” is meant to be read as a single unit, but we shall not reproduce here the entire sentence with this interpretation for it is too distasteful.

v) the *tachyon* (“tac”) is the analog of the Japanese “nanka” particle, which expresses disgust or contempt. It is named for the tachyon, that faster-than-light particle so revered by scribblers of simplistic science-fiction screenplays and so reviled by specialists in special relativity because it (the tachyon, not special relativity) does not exist.

vi) the *stop squark* (“squark”) is a meaningless particle used only to preserve meter in poetry. As we improve English grammar, we have a wonderful opportunity to simultaneously improve English poetry. Many of the changes proposed here will alter a poem’s meter, but this can be remedied if we introduce a new particle. The stop squark is hypothesized to be the lightest of all the squarks and also may not even exist, so it will barely be noticeable, which is precisely what we want for our filler particle that serves only to preserve poetic scansion.

Lest the reader tire of this catalogue, we shall pause to illustrate the effect of these particles, introducing them to one of e e cummings’ most famous poems. In order to preserve the 12-syllable line length, a few pointless syllables needed to be removed, and the incomplete two-syllable line in the original was fixed:

i carry your heart with me(i carry it in  
my heart)i am never without it(anywhere

i go you go,my dear;and glu whatev is done  
by only me is your doing,my darling squark)  
squark squark squark i squark squark squark fear squark squark squark squark  
no fate(for you are my fate,my sweet squark)i want  
no world(for beautiful you are my world,my true)  
and it's you are whatev a moon has always meant  
and glu whatev a sun will always sing is you

We see the magical effect even a light dusting of particles can have. We shall define one final particle, and return to the remaining fifty in a subsequent paper.

vii) the *lepton* ("lep"). At the request of our colleague Saintarctica Ottorino, a hallucinographer of considerable renown, we have been prompted to define an analog of the wonder and amazement particles ("-en" and "aya") used in the Ilocano language. The lepton (which, as is all too infrequently remarked, is short for *lepidopteron*), also known as the "butterfly particle" because of its fluttering waveform, is the most suitable candidate from the quantum mechanical canon.

With all of these particles at our disposal, we can update Shakespeare's Sonnet 18:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's squark day lep inf squark?  
Thou art more lovelyo lep and glu more temperateo.  
Rough winds gra squark do shake the darling buds pho of May squark,  
And glu summer's lease hath squark all too short a squark date gra.

The mysteries of Shakespeare thus resolved, we now turn to the final and most vital innovation of the New Grammar.

#### **4. The Pluperfect Abstruse**

One of the most obvious limitations of the English language is that there is no way to indicate when one's words carry some special subtextual or superliteral import, beyond their mere surface meaning. Because of this, wordplay, allegory, irony, and symbolism often elude even the most attentive reader. A new verb tense can remedy this: the abstruse tense. The abstruse can be used any time a sentence carries a non-literal meaning so subtle the listener will probably not

apprehend it without further indication. For its conjugation, we borrow from old English. Rephrasing “you do” and “it does” as “thou dost” and “it doth” achieves the stately grandiloquence the abstruse intends. We can, in the present tense, conjugate the abstruse in a similar way, though to avoid confusion with Shakespearean English, we shall change one vowel: the present abstruse appends “-ist” in the first and second persons, and “-ith” in the third person. The pluperfect, past, and future tenses then conjugate in the familiar ways.

We may better brook the brookbabble of the trails and tributaries of Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* when it is accordingly rephrased:

riverrunith, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, bringith us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs.

Sir Tristram, violer d'amores, fr'over the short sea, hadith passencore rearrivithed from North Armorica on this side the scraggy isthmus of Europe Minor to wielderfightith his penisolate pho war: ...

Its sense is as improved as its tense. We remark on the ease with which the reader may now identify the verbs in the text.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

We close with remarks that will be illuminating to future scholarship. For a text advancing a new grammar to be comprehensible to its audience, it must be written in the old grammar. But once the new grammar is adopted, a text advocating its adoption will no longer serve any purpose. We thus uncover an irony, or perhaps a new category of logical paradox: the only English text there is no reason to rewrite in the new grammar is precisely that text that proposes the new grammar in the first place. That is the explanation for the conservative grammatical choices the present author has made in writing this paper.

The interested reader may wish also to now attempt to resolve the problems posed by the opening dialogue. We leave as an exercise how one might, using the several grammatical innovations proposed herein, emend the Manager’s “lol” to convey the various meanings it might suggest.